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JEFFERSON DAVIS.

A MEMORIAL ADDRESS,

DELIVERED IN

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, RICHMOND, VA.,

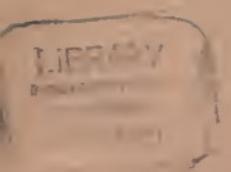
DECEMBER 11, 1889,

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REV. CHARLES MINNIGERODE, D. D.,

RECTOR EMERITUS.

RICHMOND, VA.:
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ADDRESS.

The first time I ever saw Jefferson Davis was when, as President of the Confederate States, he had arrived in Richmond and held his first reception at the Spotswood Hotel. Our acquaintance, thus began, soon grew into friendly intercourse that became closer and closer, till an intimacy sprung up which ripened into companionship in joy and sorrow, and bound us together in terms of mutual trust and friendship that was to last as long as life, and which will remain forever one of my dearest remembrances.

The last time I saw him was a few years ago, when we met at Atlanta, Ga. I was going there with my wife to pay a visit to one of my sons, not knowing or remembering that the day of my arrival was the day when, on the occasion of the unveiling of the statue of Hon. B. H. Hill, Mr. Davis was to deliver the oration. On entering the city

I wondered what the holiday appearance, the crowded streets, the festooned houses could mean, but was too late for the exercises. After dinner I went to call on him at Mrs. Hill's, where he was staying, resting at the time, and excused to visitors. But on seeing my name on the card, the kind lady carried me to his room. As I entered the door, and he looked up from the sofa where he was reclining, he sprang up, and rushing upon me, clasped me in his arms, and there locked in each other's embrace, tears testified the depth of our joy once more to meet. An hour never to be forgotten by me! nor the solemn feeling that possessed us both at our parting, when, in suppressed voice, he said: "This is the last time we have looked upon each other on earth."

To you, dear brethren, and especially the Rector, Wardens, and Vestry of this church, and to the whole congregation, I return my thanks, from the bottom of my heart, that you have honored me with the invitation to meet with you on this occasion, and unite with you in doing honor to the memory of the great, the honored, noble son of the South—Jefferson Davis; that among the

many proud tributes of praise and glory offered at his burial to-day, I, in my humble position of what proved to be his life-long pastor, may lay a wreath of loving remembrance on his tomb.

We humbly bow in human sorrow to the Divine Disposer of all things, but lift our hearts in holy hope that, from a life of toil and labor and martyrdom, he has entered upon the rest in heaven, and obtained a crown brighter than any crown that earth can weave—the crown of glory and eternal life. These are strong words, but it is my firm belief, my brethren; and I believe that on this point the evidences of my hope are stronger than, perhaps, those of any other man. I have been his pastor ever since the spring of 1861; been with him through the eventful days of those many years of the war and the sad days that followed; known the struggles, the hopes and fears of his inner life; saw him in his darkest trials; sounded his heart, laid open to me unreservedly, and beheld *the man*—the man himself, the heart, disposition, character—in all his faith and purity and gentleness, all his weaknesses, as his firmness of principle, his

untarnished honesty and unhesitating conscientiousness, his perseverance through every doubt and every difficulty, his conquest of himself amidst the indignities he had to bear, his undying love to his neighbor, beginning with his own family, through all the gradations of the society in which he moved, his tender, generous feeling towards the poor and with bleeding heart toward his suffering people, true to his country, true to his God. Of course, he had his faults; he would not have been human without them; but it was just in the conflict with his failings and the reality of his repentance, the determination to deal earnestly with himself, and not to be satisfied with "a name to live without the power"; just in these internal conflicts, open to the eye of God, he was preserved from self-deception or spiritual pride, and was the humble petitioner for grace before the throne of God. Those lonely rides which he so often took, I am sure, were not only filled with anxious thoughts about his country and plans for the guidance and defence of his people, but I am convinced they often were the time of sweet,

humble, trusting, prayerful intercourse with his Heavenly Father and his Saviour.

People have misunderstood Mr. Davis very much. Before I knew him, I often heard him spoken as a “fire-eater;” but I am sure he did not deserve that name, unless it means the man, firm and bold and uncompromising, standing by what is right even unto death. No, he was no brawler, no demagogue, no friend to violence. It was a sore trouble to him to yield to what appeared to him at last the necessity of secession; and wrath, cruelty, bloodthirstiness were far from him. His real nature was gentle, and conscience ruled him supreme. Such was the sense of his responsibility, that whilst when it was plain, decided action, albeit the most dangerous, was needed, he never flinched; but such was his scrupulous conscientiousness, that at times, when the issue was not clear, he would stay to weigh so fully the pros and cons that this delay at times may have interfered with a success. And I have reason to believe it was his love and attachment for Richmond which caused him to confine the troops in the trenches, rather than give up his capital in time to meet the enemy in the

open field while yet there was hope in Lee's army to cope with him.

I never meddled with his policy or measures of his government; still less did I ever use his confidence for any personal purposes. Mr. Davis was not the man for that.

On two occasions only I sought him with the desire of presenting my views on what seemed to me important cases. The time had come for the permanent government to take the place of the provisional. It was a very critical time, and I felt I had a right to direct the attention of the President to some thoughts which any one had the right to give utterance to, and which I, as his pastor, could without impropriety lay before him. I did so, supported in my view by one of the most judicious men of Richmond, John Stewart, of Brookhill. It was this: We were starting upon a new epoch in the history of the Confederacy. To start aright, and hope for any lasting success, we must have the favor of God, the King of Kings, and the God of battles. That was all acknowledged by us openly. Let us now, I wrote to him, do it in good earnest! I reminded Mr. Davis that all history showed

that the character of the ruler was apt to become the guide or pattern of the people; that the great lesson of the historical books of the Bible—the books of Kings and of Chronicles—was that “as the king, so the people”; that evil examples, in the words of Jeremiah, “made the people sin,” and that God’s judgment will overtake both; whilst the people of Judah always repented and did right whenever their King adhered to the law, and Jehovah’s blessing was upon both. From this I pressed his responsibility in this respect, and adjured him as such at this critical point manfully to assume this position, that as God alone can guide us aright and bless us, he should show the way and begin right by pressing this necessity of having God on our side on his people in the address he was to make from the Washington monument at the Capitol Square, and exhorting them to unite with him in the prayer for God’s favor, and solemnly putting our welfare and success, as well as the means that should lead to it, under His holy and righteous care and protection.

Mr. Davis never answered it, and in all my intercourse with him I never referred to it. *But he did what I asked him to do.*

The only other time I ventured to speak to him on the policy to be pursued was when, caused by some proclamation or some outrageous act on the part of our invaders, the people demanded retaliation and the public papers loudly demanded this course. Our interview was most harmonious, and Mr. Davis used these noble words: "If our enemies do or should do wrong, that is no reason or excuse that we should do so, too."

It was soon after his inauguration that he united himself with the Church. Our intercourse had become more frequent, and turned more and more on the subject of religion; and by his wife's advice I went to see him on the subject of confessing Christ. He met me more than half way, and expressed his desire to do so, and unite himself with the Church; that he must be a Christian he felt in his inmost soul. He spoke very earnestly and most humbly of needing the cleansing blood of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit; but in the consciousness of his insufficiency felt some doubt whether he had the right to come.

All that was natural and right; but soon it settled this question with a man so

resolute in doing what he thought his duty. I baptized him hypothetically, for he was not certain if he had ever been baptized. When the day of confirmation came it was quite in keeping with his resolute character, that when the Bishop called the candidates to the chancel he was the first to rise, and, as it were, lead the others on, among whom were General Gorgas and several other officers.

From that day, so far as I know and can judge, "he never looked back." He never ceased trying to come up to his baptismal vow and lead a Christian life. And so he went on bravely and perseveringly, even when it became clear that hope of success was failing. He could not leave his post. He did not lose heart. The cause lost—defeated for a time—he felt sure would yet bring forth blessings upon the country.

We know what followed and what was his cruel fate. Here opens a page of noble martyrdom and patient endurance which none can fully realize who have not seen it.

Soon after he was arrested and confined in Fortress Monroe, I wrote to President Andrew Johnson, petitioning for permission

to visit Mr. Davis, as his pastor, and minister to him.

At Bishop Johns' advice—rather against my judgment—it was accompanied by no argument, the Bishop saying that supporting it by an argument would indicate that it was by the petitioner himself not looked upon as natural, right, and proper in itself.

Mr. Johnson deigned no answer.

In October following I received a communication of some friends that they thought the time was favorable to again make the application.

I did so, but this time gave what I thought was a full and unanswerable argument. And it proved so.

They were ladies who were acting with me, and upon the advice of a judicious friend they gave my paper to Rev. Dr. Hall, rector of the Church of the Epiphany and pastor of Mr. Stanton, Secretary of War. He first was adverse to acting in the matter, but the ladies begged him at least to read the petition. He did so, and consented to take it in charge to Mr. Stanton, and he got me a very full permit to visit Mr. Davis as his pastor.

From that time I went whenever I could

to see my beloved and martyred friend, and precious were the days and hours spent with him. I loved that lowly, patient, God-fearing soul. It was in these private interviews that I learned to appreciate his noble Christian character; "pure in heart," unselfish, without guile, and loyal unto death to his conscience and convictions.

Mr. Stanton's permit must have been very liberal, for General Miles, then in command, who received me politely enough, did not act for more than a day, after which he became very cordial and advanced all my wishes. He evidently had asked and received fuller instructions from the Secretary.

I must say here that the imprisonment itself was better than those who had ordered it. All at the Fortress were glad that the indignities of putting that man in irons were stopped, even for the honor of the country. The officers were all polite and sympathetic, and the common soldiers—not one of them adopted the low practice of even high dignitaries and officers, who seemed to glory in speaking of him disrespectfully in a sneering way as "Jeff. Davis." Not one of the common soldiers but spoke of him in a subdued and kindly tone as "Mr. Davis."

On my first visit I came on Saturday evening, and spent a pleasant enough evening at the headquarters of General Miles, who promised to take me to Mr. Davis' cell next morning (Sunday), but he waited till Monday morning.

I cannot describe my meeting with Mr. Davis in his cell. He knew nothing of my coming, and it was difficult to control ourselves.

Mr. Davis' room (he had been removed from the casemate,) was an end room on the second floor of Carroll Hall, with a passage and window on each side of the room; and an ante-room in front separated by an open grated door—a sentinel on each passage and before the grated door of the ante-room; six eyes always upon him day and night; all alone, no one to see, no one to speak to.

I must hurry on. You may yourselves make out what our conservation must have been.

The noble man showed the effect of the confinement, but his spirit could not be subdued, and no indignity—angry as it made him at the time—could humiliate him.

I was his pastor, and of course our conversation was influenced by that, and there

could be no holding back between us. I had come to sympathize and comfort and pray with him.

At last the question of the Holy Communion came up. I really do not remember whether he or I first mentioned it. He was very anxious to take it. He was a pure and pious man, and felt the need and value of the means of grace. But there was one difficulty. Could he take it in the proper spirit—in the frame of a forgiving mind, after all the ill-treatment he had been subjected to? He was too upright and conscientious a Christian man “to eat and drink *unworthily*,” *i.e.*, not in the proper spirit, and, as far as lay in him, in peace with God and man.

I left him to settle that question between himself and his own conscience and what he understood God’s law to be.

In the afternoon General Miles took me to him again. I had spoken to him about the communion, and he promised to make preparation for me.

I found Mr. Davis with his mind made up. Knowing the honesty of the man, and that there would be, could be “no shamming” nor mere superstitious belief in the

ordinance, I was delighted when I found him ready to commune. He had laid the bridle upon his very natural feeling and was ready to pray "Father, forgive them."

Then came the communion—he and I alone, no one but God with us. It was one of those cases where the Rubric cannot be binding. It was night. The fortress was so still that you could hear a pin fall. General Miles, with his back to us, leaning against the fireplace in the ante-room; his head on his hands not moving; the sentinels ordered to stand still, and they stood like statues.

I cannot conceive of a more solemn communion scene. But it was telling upon both of us, I trust, for lasting good.

Whenever I could I went down to see him, if only for an hour or two; and when his wife was admitted to see him it was plain that their communings were with God.

Time passed; not a sign of any humiliating giving way to the manner in which he was treated; he was above that. He suffered, but was willing to suffer in the cause of the people who had given him their

confidence and who still loved and admired and wept for the man that so nobly represented the cause which in their hearts they considered right and constitutional.

His health began to be affected. The officers of the fortress all felt that he ought to have the liberty of the fort, not only because that could in no way facilitate any attempt to escape, but because they knew he did not wish to escape, and could not have been induced to escape. He wanted to be tried and defend and justify his course. I happened to be in Washington for a few hours at that time, and as I had been told by Rev. Dr. Hall more than once that Mr. Stanton spoke of me very kindly, he encouraged me to see him about any matter I thought proper in Mr. Davis' case.

I went to see Mr. Stanton. He had recently lost his son, and had been deeply distressed—softened one would think; I hoped so all the more as I found him with his remaining child on his knees. I was admitted. A bow and nothing more. I began by expressing my thanks to him for allowing me to visit Mr. Davis, and that as I was in town, I thought it would not be

nuingeresting to him to hear a report about Mr. Davis. Not a word in reply.

I gradually approached the subject of Mr. Davis' health, and that without the least danger of any kind as to his safe imprisonment, he might enjoy some privileges, especially the liberty of the fort, or there was danger of his health failing.

The silence was broken.

"It makes no difference what the state of Jeff. Davis' health is. His trial will soon come on, no doubt. Time enough till that settles it." It settled it in my leaving the presence of that man.

But the time came for his release. The way he conducted himself just showed the man whom no distress could put down nor a glimpse of hope could unduly excite. He had seen too much and had placed his all in higher hands than man's.

We brought him to the Spotswood Hotel, and then to the custom-house. There the trial was to take place. We were in a carriage, the people, and especially the colored people, testifying their sympathy. Mr. Davis was greatly touched by this.

All know that the proceedings in court were very brief.

I was by his side. Mr. Davis stood erect, looking steadily upon the judge, but without either defiance or fear. He was bailed, and the first man to go on his bond was Horace Greeley.

Our carriage passed with difficulty through the crowd of rejoicing negroes with their tender affection, climbing upon the carriage, shaking and kissing his hand, and calling out, "God bless Mars Davis." But we got safely to the Spotswood.

We found Mrs. Davis awaiting us, with Hon. George Davis, Attorney-General of the last Cabinet, and a few others.

Mr. George Davis and I just fell into each other's arms with tears in our eyes.

But Mr. Davis turned to me: "Mr. Minnigerode, you who have been with me in my sufferings, and comforted and strengthened me with your prayers, is it not right that we now once more should kneel down together and return thanks?" There was not a dry eye in the room. Mrs. Davis led the way into the adjoining room, more private; and there, in the deep-felt prayer and thanksgiving, closed the story of Jefferson Davis' prison life.

Ah, this earth in more senses than one continued a prison-life for him; a feeling from which few of those advancing in life are wholly exempt. But Mr. Davis murmured not; did not ask to be taken away. He stayed and worked and studied and wrote in his home at Beauvoir till the Lord called him—took his servant home who had tried to serve Him amidst danger and trials, wind and storms. He has gone to his reward.

And thou, oh land of the South, oh thou beautiful city of Richmond, thank God that such a man has been given to you, loved by you, and in his memory is blessed to you. He loved the truth; he served God and his country. Let us go and do likewise.

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